

*Responsibility involves providing proper housing, nutrition, grooming and veterinary care*

## Background

- Hamsters were first discovered in Syria, but they are native to many parts of the world. The name they go by today is derived from the German word “hamster,” which means “hoard,” because that is exactly what they do with any extra food that they find. Their looks and activities have provided people with enjoyment and entertainment for years.
- The most common pet hamster is the eight-inch Syrian, often called the “golden hamster” for his honey-colored fur. Dwarf species such as the Siberian, Roborovsky’s Djungarian, and Chinese are smaller than Syrians, at about three to four inches. Hamsters come in a wide variety of coat colors and types, and they may be all one color or multicolored.
- Hamsters are nocturnal animals who live for about two or three years. They are very frisky, and can easily escape from a cage that isn’t closed securely. Their eyesight isn’t very good, so they can fall off tables while running around loose. Hamsters are known to bite if they’re not used to being handled or if they’re mistreated. They also tend to nip when awakened during the day.
- Because of their nocturnal nature and tendency to nip, hamsters of any species are *not* appropriate pets for families with small children. Children under the age of six should not be allowed to handle these fragile animals, and those over six should be supervised by an adult.

## Housing

- Hamsters should be kept in a wire cage or a 10-gallon aquarium that has a wire-mesh top. The enclosure should be placed away from direct sunlight or drafts, and lined with an absorbent bedding or some other form of safe litter. Timothy hay is a good choice. Avoid using pine or cedar chips, because the fumes from these products can be harmful to the animal. Be sure to change the litter often enough to keep it dry and odor-free.
- Hamsters like to play, so give them an exercise wheel to use and/or allow them to run around outside of their cage

for a supervised period of time each day. Remember to keep them in one room that’s been checked carefully for any openings from which the hamsters can escape, get lost and possibly meet with some harm. Hamsters also like to hide and sleep inside enclosed spaces, so it’s a good idea to place a small box inside their cage. They love crawling through tubes, which can be homemade or bought in pet supply stores.

## Diet

- Offer your pet hamster mix, which contains seeds, grains, cracked corn and pellets and is available at many pet-supply stores. You should supplement his diet with fresh grains, sunflower seeds and nuts (not too many, please, as these are high in fat), alfalfa pellets, and fresh fruits and vegetables such as spinach, lettuce and apples. Be sure to clean up any leftover fresh food before it spoils.
- Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. It is best to use an inverted bottle with a drinking tube, which should be changed daily.
- Hamsters like to carry food in pouches in their mouths and then store it in the corners of their cage, so always be sure to check the corners for any hidden stashes when cleaning.

## General Care

- Don’t forget your weekly housekeeping duties! Remove and replace the bedding, and scrub the bottom of the cage with hot, soapy water.
- Hamsters’ teeth grow continuously, just like those of all other rodents. So it is very important that they be given a piece of wood that they can gnaw on and wear their teeth down with. Ideally, you should try to provide a twig that has not been treated with pesticides, other chemicals or paints. Pieces of dog biscuit are great for this purpose as well.
- Djungarians and Siberians like to live in pairs, and Chinese hamsters also enjoy company. However, if two or more Syrians are kept together, fighting will

break out. Syrian hamsters *must* live alone. Since hamsters multiply rapidly, keeping males and females in the same cage together is not recommended.

- Hamsters generally live healthy lives, but they have been known to catch colds from people. A hamster who is ill should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

## WHERE CAN YOU FIND A HAMSTER?

The ASPCA recommends getting yours from a responsible breeder or adopting one from a shelter or small-animal rescue group. Call your local shelter and search on sites like [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com) for hamsters in need of loving homes.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- “ASPCA Pet Care Guides for Kids—Hamster”; Mark Evans; Dorling Kindersley; London, England; 1993.
- In case of accidental poisoning, call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center (ASPCA/APCC) 24-Hour Emergency Hotline Numbers: (888) 4ANI-HELP (426-4435) (\$50 per case; Visa, MasterCard, Discover or American Express when you call.)



**The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**  
National Headquarters • 424 E. 92nd St. • New York, NY 10128-6804 •  
(212) 876-7700 • [www.aspc.org](http://www.aspc.org)

Midwestern Regional Office • 1717 South Philo Road, Suite 36 •  
Urbana, IL 61802 • (217) 337-5030 • [www.aspc.org/apcc](http://www.aspc.org/apcc)

TM and ® are protected by The ASPCA. ©2004 The ASPCA